

***Historical Cultures in Transition: Negotiating Memory, History and Identity
in the Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe***

According to Andrzej Szpociński, historical culture is a "set of ideas, norms, patterns of behaviour and socially respected values, which regulate forms of relating to everything that is considered to be past (long gone, historical) in a given culture, regardless of the actual state of affairs." In other words, the concept refers to the entirety of our attitude to the past, or, to be even more specific, to what we consider as the past and how we imagine it. By "our" attitude we mean first and foremost state or national communities or their parts – regional or local communities. An image of the past is always "someone's," it fulfils someone's needs and strengthens or weakens someone's identity. In particular, it would be unthinkable that any nation could exist without a narration about the past consisting of a sequence of images. Likewise, it is impossible to form a European identity without coming to an agreement regarding the common narrative about history.

Comparative studies on historical cultures of contemporary states are not yet a fully developed scholarly discipline. By studying the historical cultures of Poland and Ukraine, we want to address in particular the kind of transformations that the contemporary identity of their inhabitants is undergoing and to what extent it is based on images of the past. Since about the year 2000, both these countries have been facing two challenges. On the one hand, Western European countries have developed a system of protecting their own cultural heritage (monuments, works of high culture), and as the foundation of identity that they want to co-create they have chosen first and foremost the Holocaust. On the other hand, for the authorities in Russia the goal is to integrate people with the help of historical myths about the greatness of the state to the extent that citizens start unreservedly supporting the restoration of the rank of superpower for their country. Until recently, Poland and Ukraine responded to these challenges in different ways. Poland has a much more developed system of research and protection of its cultural heritage than Ukraine. It has also initiated a number of activities aimed to commemorate the history of Polish-Jewish relations. This difference stems mainly from the experience of the impact that the Polish state has had on the collective memory in the country since 1918, and also the fact that Ukrainian society has been more divided regarding their own past than the Poles, and the path to eliminate barriers within it opened perhaps the only with the outbreak of the revolution of 2014.

At the same time, Poland and Ukraine share an extensive tradition of, on the one hand, intercultural coexistence, and on the other – military conflicts, during which, especially in the years 1939–1947, mass crimes were committed. Our study also aims to determine why historians, politicians and the public in these two countries cannot agree on the image of the events of the twentieth century, and even mutually blame each other for having provoked the conflict. We believe that one of the sources of confusion lies in the structural difference between their respective historical cultures. On the one hand, the state is significantly weaker in Ukraine than in Poland, not only in the area of activities aimed at investigating and commemorating the past (suffice to compare the budgets of the two institutes of national remembrance or the number of new museums in either of the countries), but also in other fields. On the other hand, in Ukraine there are social actors (houses of historical knowledge, memory protection organisations or historical websites on the Internet) that are trying to step in and replace the state in that function, but they do not have sufficient resources at their disposal.

Research in our project will be implemented in three subsequent phases. In phase A, we are going to investigate what images of the past, including past relations between Poland and Ukraine, "ordinary" Poles and Ukrainians have today. For this purpose, we will conduct nation-wide surveys and interviews with selected representatives of various social groups, in order to obtain data on memory and collective identity. Then, in phase B, we will analyse the images of the past: "old" and "new" media (TV history programs, historical magazines), school (history curricula) and social actors, in order to assess their impact on the memory of Poles and Ukrainians. Finally, in phase C, we are going to examine the politics of memory pursued by the authorities of the two states and other participants in politics (political parties, social movements). We will look at how they respond to the previously mentioned external challenges, and whether they use images of the past to strengthen their position in the eyes of voters.

Over the course of the project, we will organise four events in order to present the results, during which we are hoping to learn what the residents of the two countries think about their historical cultures.